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Dead Letter

A Jan. 5 letter stamped "secret" from Secretary of State Alexander Haig to President Reagan, urging emergency funds for Radio Free Europe to reach captive Poland, two months later lies dormant in White House files—the victim of bureaucratic inertia.

That the president himself probably never read it and certainly did not study its importance is another melancholy example of how tardily democratic government reacts to unexpected crisis. Here was an opportunity—informing Polish patriots shackled by martial law—to be grasped by cutting bureaucratic corners and bypassing staff lethargies. The same opportunity would have produced instant decision in the Kremlin.

But in the Reagan White House, corners are not easily cut. The letter from Haig—co-signed by Reagan's old friend, Charles Z. Wick, head of the International remains submerged in the White House bureaucracy.

RFE, which broadcasts from Munich to Eastern European Soviet satellites, proved its ability to penetrate a Polish news blackout in August 1980. The Communist government's first reaction to Solidarity's uprising in Gdansk was to cut all communications out of that Baltic seaport. Down in the coal-mining regions of Silesia, party first secretary (and Politburo member) Zdzislaw Grudzieu said publicly the "only" information that even he had of the electrifying movement in Gdansk came from RFE.

Haig's Jan. 5 letter informed Reagan that a key purpose of martial law in Poland was to impose the silence of the grave throughout the country by cutting all communications. Leaders of Solidarity not in jail would be blind and deaf.

RFE, operating on its same budget of the past five years, managed to increase Polish broadcasts from 19 to 24 hours a day for a week after martial law. But it was forced back to 19 hours by inadequate funds and staff fatigue. Soviet jamming signals are under no such financial restraints. Ten Soviet-based jamming transmitters are going full blast against RFE's Polish broadcasts and transmissions to the Soviet Union by Radio Liberty.

Haig, Wick and Shakespeare told the president in

their long-ago letter that RFE and RL must be given at least \$15 million to \$20 million extra for a crash program to modernize their dilapidated Munich studios, upgrade transmitting signals and hire extra staff. They also asked an additional \$280 million to build more powerful transmitting stations for RFE and RL, as well as the U.S. government's Voice of America.

But in the Reagan White House, even letters from Al Haig to Ronald Reagan are routinely deflected into the system, in this case the National Security Council staff and the Office of Management and Budget. Haig's letter was no exception, despite the Polish crisis and Reagan's campaign attack against President Carter for starving RFE and RL ("a Reagan-Bush administration will turn this sorry situation around," Reagan promised Oct. 7, 1980).

White House aides claim mitigating circumstances: that the new budget was locked up before Haig's letter arrived; that it contained no careful "justification"; that in the transition of William P. Clark's succeeding Richard V. Allen as NSC director, the NSC was understandably in a state of confusion.

The truth is simpler. Normal operating habits of the U.S. government, even at its loftiest levels, lack flexibility for momentous decisions. This conclusion is underlined in the Reagan White House by the phalanx of palace guards surrounding and protecting the Oval Office from the outside world.

The president has been privy to only one brief meeting on the need for emergency RFE financing. When it came up then, both chief of staff James Baker and counselor Edwin Meese, neither of whom knows much about Poland, wanted full OMB justification.

"They sent it into the glue factory," one official told us, even though the cost is a small fraction of a single B1 bomber (\$250 million). RFE's value in informing Polish patriots about what their martial law leaders are doing is worth a fleet of B1s. That simple conclusion would be reached by Reagan in an instant—if he were asked.

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